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# **THE POVERTY OF PROGRESSIVISM**

Thoughts on American Democracy

**A**merican democracy is at a watershed. The so-called "social contract" governing American politics since 1945 has broken down. Although the talk of a "Republican Revolution" is surely hyperbolic, the conservative Republican agenda has significant political momentum, and it seeks to effect a serious transformation of the infrastructure of postwar liberal democracy—a drastic retrenchment of federal social policy, a reduction of the fiscal and policy resources of the federal government, and a devolution of political power to state and local governments. The conservative vision rests on a rhetoric of pseudodemocratic populism that counterposes a mythic America to an unsavory cast of characters—variously called "liberal elites," "the Washington establishment," and "the counterculture"—who are purported to rule America and to be responsible for the corruption of its economy and its soul. It is no exaggeration to say that this vision represents a repudiation of the spirit of progressive social reform that has prevailed in the United States for the past century.

This assault on liberal politics is the surface expression of deeper difficulties confronting American liberal democracy. Our party system is in disrepute, and public faith in and engagement with the political system has plummeted. American political culture is fractured along racial lines and riven by "culture wars" that have badly damaged the social consensus on which postwar liberalism rested, and these fractures have helped to fuel the emergence of a potent, if small, movement of right-wing extremists. Accompanying the growth of alienation and resentment is a breakdown of

the conditions of economic growth that helped to sustain postwar liberalism. New forms of global investment have created a "lean and mean" economy in which relatively secure and high-paying employment increasingly has given way to insecure low-wage jobs. The real wage of the average American worker has stagnated, and inequalities in the distribution of income and wealth have grown.

American liberalism, then, is politically adrift. Yet a powerful liberal response has recently emerged. Liberal democrats, it is argued, need to revive a "progressive" politics that is modeled heavily on the Progressive movement of the last century. Like the citizens of the 1890s, it is argued, we are poised at the dawn of a new century, confronting severe challenges that demand a new spirit of reform and a new "activist public policy," centered around the problems of a postindustrial economy and the decline of middle-class living standards.

While I find this argument in some ways compelling, I believe it is anachronistic, and that democrats who wish to address the serious problems confronting American liberal democracy should think about these questions in a different way. The conditions that made previous reform efforts possible no longer obtain, and the political world that we inhabit can support neither the policies contemporary progressives envision nor the confidence in political agency that these policies presuppose. This does not mean that responses to our current difficulties are impossible. But a meaningful democratic politics for the new century must be *chastened* in a way that the new progressive arguments are not.

### The New Progressivism

Emanating from the center and the center-left of the Democratic party, the new progressivism wishes to revive the project of social reform initiated by the turn-of-the-century Progressives.\* John Judis and Michael Lind's manifesto "For a New American Nationalism," the centerpiece of a March 1995 issue of the *New Republic*, helped to bring these arguments to the fore. Criticizing the incoherence of the Clinton administration and the "primitive anti-statism" of Gingrichite Republicanism, Judis and Lind call for a "new nationalism," inspired by the examples of Alexander Hamilton, Abraham Lincoln, and Theodore Roosevelt, and summed up in Herbert Croly's influential *The Promise of American Life* (1909). As they write:

America today faces a situation roughly analogous to the one Roosevelt and the progressives faced. Workers are not threatening to man the barricades against capitalists, but society is divided into mutually hostile camps . . . the goal of a new nationalism today is to forestall these looming divisions in American society . . . Can we meet these challenges? In the decades between Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt, the country floundered as badly as it has during the last few decades. Their mountebanks were no different from ours; their corruption was even more pervasive; and their sense of political paralysis even more profound. Still, they were able to think and act anew. As we prepare to enter the next century, we believe that we are on the verge of a similar era of national renewal.

This theme is echoed in E.J. Dionne, Jr.'s *They Only Look Dead: Why Progressives Will Dominate the Next Political Era*. Opening with an epigraph from Theodore Roosevelt, Dionne endorses a "New Progressivism," also inspired by Croly, whose "task is to restore the legitimacy of public life by renewing the effectiveness of government and reforming the workings of politics." This theme is frequently sounded in the pages of important liberal journals of opinion

\*A list of new progressives would include such writers as Robert Bellah, Alan Brinkley, Thomas Byrne Edsall, Eldon Eisenach, Jeff Faux, Stanley Greenberg, Robert Kuttner, Michael Piore, Michael Sandel, Cass Sunstein, Michael Tomasky, and Jacob Weisberg. A longer version of this essay discusses this broader literature.

like the *New Republic* and the *American Prospect*.

But the most emphatic endorsement of such a politics is found in Michael Lind's *The Next American Nation*. Lind argues that we currently stand poised for economic and cultural renewal at the dawn of a "Fourth American Revolution." Like most of the other "progressives," Lind views the impasse of liberalism as the result of two reinforcing processes—the domination of American politics by an economic elite and the cultural and racial polarization that has fragmented the traditional constituencies of liberal democratic governance and abetted the rise of the New Right. Lind's solution: a "liberal nationalism" inspired by Hamilton and Roosevelt, which deploys the powers of the federal government in "an egalitarian assault on the unjust and inequitable political institutions" of American society. Such an assault will require "a genuine democratization of our money-dominated political system and a commitment to the kind of social-democratic reforms" supported by the New Deal alliance before its demise under the weight of inflationary racial and cultural demands.

Lind's book is the most programmatic expression of the new progressive revival. It outlines an elaborate set of policies designed to turn back the deterioration in middle-class living standards and to cement a strong reformist political coalition. Lind supports campaign finance reform; a pragmatic and flexible trade policy to replace indiscriminate free trade; immigration reform; more progressive taxation; a high-wage, technology-intensive growth industrial policy based upon tight labor markets; and strong, national reform of health care, education, and welfare. Such policies, he avers, can only succeed as part of a "war on oligarchy" that seeks to make the accumulation of private wealth compatible with overall national interests. This is an ambitious policy agenda, linked to an even more ambitious vision of national renewal. Lind proposes a virtual cultural revolution in American society, whereby Americans come to see themselves as part of a "trans-racial" nation committed to social justice, and the polarities of identity politics give way before a new sense of American national identity.

**T**here are parallels between these new appropriations of liberal progressivism and arguments on the left about the need to revive class politics in America. Indeed, the rehabilitation of Croly among liberals is mirrored among radicals by the revival of a Gramscian project of developing a new emergent “progressive” hegemony. The most thoughtful argument to this effect has been advanced by Joel Rogers.\* Rogers echoes Lind in his insistence that the renewal of American democracy requires that the “social control of the economy” must be put “back on the table of American politics.” But his argument is even *more* ambitious, for it seeks to support an organized mass movement “challenging corporate power and mobilizing outside the state.”

Rogers proposes a three-pronged strategy: (1) Democracy Now, a movement for citizen, worker, consumer, and taxpayer bills of rights; (2) Sustainable America, a high-wage industrial strategy based on a social tariff, full employment, and a shortened work week; (3) The New Party, “a natural electoral vehicle for a more consolidated progressive movement—a movement that itself should be built in part through greater national coordination and presence, and in larger part, in terms of organizational strategy, from the ground up.”

These arguments converge on a number of claims: that the so-called “New Deal coalition” has been shattered; that the social democratic reforms of the postwar period are under siege; and that the only way to defend them and to address our social and economic problems is to rebuild a coherent liberal-left movement, and to fashion a partisan vehicle for this movement.

On the first two points it is impossible to dissent. Yet I believe that the conclusion that is drawn from them is mistaken. The policies typically supported by progressives—labor law reform, a corporatist industrial policy, a shortened work week, health care reform, welfare reform, a social tariff, public investment—are good ones. And the idea of unifying diverse constituencies around such a program is appealing. The prob-

lem with the new progressivism is not principally its desirability but its *practicality*. The reforms, and the movement-building strategy to which they are connected, are anachronistic. They constitute an effort to revive a politics of a unified “left” under conditions when this politics is no longer symbolically compelling or politically feasible.

### Fallacies of Progressivism

The new progressives acknowledge that today’s politics cannot simply recapitulate the progressivism of the past. As Michael Piore acknowledges: “The context in which we are resurrecting social policy today is new and different from the context in which it was pursued in the past, and the institutions through which it is implemented must be different as well, even if we call them by names borrowed from the past and charge them with functionally equivalent missions.” Yet I do not believe that progressives have taken the full measure of this changing context, and I question whether a meaningful response to the current challenges to democracy can so easily invoke the names and missions of the past. The progressive vision rests on a number of fallacies:

- *The Materialist Fallacy.* At the heart of the progressive revival are two beliefs: (1) that the most significant fact about American life today is the deterioration of economic conditions for the majority of citizens; and (2) that the principal cause of the conservative ascendancy has been the ability of the right to obscure these economic realities. Thus Jeff Faux maintains that the Republicans have succeeded in “diverting the economic question into a social one,” and Vic Fingerhut insists that “if working and middle-income people can be conned by Republicans into thinking that this is a fight against the underserving poor, then the Republicans can win.” This theme is sounded again and again in the progressive literature—public disaffection with liberalism is due to the “cleverness” of conservatives, who have “diverted attention” from the real issues of concern to Americans, and “conned” their way into power.

But the economy is not the only issue of concern to Americans, and there is no reason to think

\*See Joel Rogers, “Why America Needs the New Party,” *Boston Review*, vol. XVIII, no. 1 (January/February 1993), pp. 1-4; and “How Divided Progressives Might Unite,” *New Left Review* (1995).

that the declining middle class is the central fact of life in America today. Important, yes; morally troubling, certainly; but politically central, no.

The new progressive literature consistently fails to attend to the cultural and symbolic sources of politics. These factors are not denied; but they are treated as surface expressions of more profound issues. Faux's language is typical—these concerns are “distractions” from what is really important, the class issue. This belief is simply wrong. Acrimonious identity politics, racial antagonism, middle-class white resentment of affirmative action and “welfare,” religious fundamentalism and the phenomenal mobilization of the Christian Coalition—these political formations are not distractions from what is truly real; they are what is real in American life. They cannot be dismissed, nor is there any self-evident way in which they can be transcended.

- *The Voluntarist Fallacy.* The new progressives understand that the class-based politics of the postwar period broke down under a complex set of pressures—the rise of the New Left, and of new social movements centered around race, gender, and sexuality, the partial co-optation of these movements by federal affirmative action policies, the crisis of cold war liberalism presented by the Vietnam War. Yet they view the sixties as a historical diversion. A revitalized progressivism, it is held, requires us to *get back on track*, to put the sources of cultural division behind us, and to move forward with a class-based politics.

I call this belief a *voluntarist* fallacy because it fails to acknowledge the irreversibility of history. We cannot turn back the clock on the past thirty years. This history is a record of heady triumphs—a civil rights revolution, profound and beneficial changes in gender and sexual attitudes, an inflationary discourse of rights that has protected previously marginalized groups but that has also produced its own hypocrisies, injustices, and resentments. It is also a record of disturbing and sometimes devastating setbacks—the dramatic decline in the organized labor movement, the emergence of new forms of white racism, the rise of anti-intellectualism and religious fundamentalism, and the prodigious ascent of the New Right. These triumphs and tragedies are two sides

of the same coin. They are the legacies of postwar liberalism. The new progressives are voluntarists because they give no account of how these divisions can be transcended, how the legacies of the past thirty years can be gotten beyond.

Perhaps the best exploration of the difficulties new progressives have on this score is Todd Gitlin's *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America Is Wracked By Culture Wars*. Gitlin offers the best account of how a fractious identity politics represents both a perversion and a natural outgrowth of the New Left. Where, then, does Gitlin leave us? “While the critics of identity politics are looting society,” he concludes, “the politics of identity is silent on the deepest sources of social misery: the devastation of cities, the draining of resources away from the public and into the private hands of the few. It does not organize to reduce the sickening inequality between rich and poor. Instead . . . it distracts what must be the natural constituencies of a Left if there is to be one: the poor, those fearful of being poor, intellectuals with sympathies for the excluded.” Gitlin's closing injunction—“We ought to be building bridges”—is noble and compelling. But it is hard to build solid bridges on shifting soil, especially when the ground is fracturing in so many directions, and the builders weather a veritable tidal wave of opposition. And it is even harder to build a single bridge on such fractious moorings, no matter how ecumenical and flexible such a bridge might be.

The fragmentation of the left is the natural history of the past three decades. The progressive clarion is the call to summon up the will to *erase* the legacy of these decades, and to move forward. The word optimism fails to do justice to the willfulness of such a will.

- *The Rationalistic Fallacy.* The progressive belief that it is possible to erase this legacy rests in large part on another fallacy. I call this the rationalistic fallacy because progressive strategies presume that the active promotion of the “truth” about the causes of our problems will, in time, lead to “progressive,” forward-looking, remedial change. This is a noble belief. Yet it is, I fear, in large part mistaken, an anachronistic residue of another, more optimistic, and more genuinely “progressive,” era.

The new progressivism fails to take the full

measure of the divorce of critical reason and effective political power. It thus vastly overstates the possibilities for the general public enlightenment that its political project presupposes. Let me briefly identify two of the principal sources of this divorce.

The first has been widely acknowledged—the insulation, professionalization, and political irrelevance of the liberal professions and of intellectuals in particular. There are, to put it simply, a limited number of venues for the promotion of the kinds of values and strategies favored by progressives.

Yet the more important cause of this divorce does not have to do with progressive intellectuals per se, but with the broader world in which they live and that they seek to affect.

Progressives are realists. They believe that they can accurately depict the world, and that their depictions can help them to alter the world. Yet in many ways the social world itself defies realism. The social world, to use a phrase coined by Jean Baudrillard, is *hyperreal*. This does not mean that there is no reality. The middle-class standard of living *has* declined. But it means that the modes of communication and experience increasingly prevalent in American society efface this reality, by juxtaposing it with other “realities,” and by creating new “realities” that necessarily detract from it, and perhaps deny it.

As Benjamin Barber points out, recent developments in mass communications—advertorials, infomercials, docudramas, soap-opera-style commercials, MTV and Nickelodeon “worlds,” corporate advertising, and the licensing of spin-off merchandising—work together to “blur the lines between domains once thought to be distinct,” so that “the distinction between reality and virtual reality vanishes.” As he writes: “distinctions of every kind are fudged: ABC places its news and sports departments under a single corporate division; television news magazines blend into entertainment programs, creating new teletabloids . . . films parade corporate logos (for a price), presidents play themselves in films . . . while dethroned governors (Cuomo and Richards) do Super Bowl commercials for snack food in which they joke about their electoral defeat, Hollywood stars run for office . . . and television pundits become practicing politi-

cians. . . . Politicians can do no right, celebrities can do no wrong—homicide included. Nothing is quite what it seems.”

Add to this the ethically anesthetizing effect of hours of television watching, for adults and, even more fatefully, for their children. And the general debasement of public discourse abetted by the rise of talk-radio and Geraldo-type live television “talk shows.” Such media subject individuals to a range of contradictory images, impulses, and desires. They produce a general cynicism about and indifference to “reality”—we can always switch the channel by remote control, can’t we?—and an affinity for episodic, fragmented modes of communication, like the video image-frame (infinitely erasable), and the thirty-second sound bite. Mass communications, in other words, dull political sensibilities, and help to create a mass social *irrealism*.

My point is not epistemological; it is *sociological*. The concerns that are central to progressives must compete with myriad other concerns that are no less pressing, and that are often *more* pressing, to most Americans. In a “hyperreal” world there is economic suffering, and it is surely important to call attention to it, and to fight against it. It is surely possible, and desirable, to organize citizens around many of the issues promoted by progressives. Yet it is difficult to imagine a *mass* politics organized around such concerns. For the facts, theories, and moral sensibilities to which progressives typically appeal necessarily fight a steeply uphill battle against the indifference, cynicism, and attention deficit disorder of American mass culture.

- *The Historicist Fallacy.* On some level most progressives know this. Yet the pessimism of their intellects does not chasten their wills. This is due in part to a sincere commitment to egalitarian values. But equally important is the historical narrative from which they draw their sustenance.

To speak of progressivism is to invoke a philosophy of history, according to which the passage of time and the development of technological and organizational capacity is associated with human betterment. Progressivism is optimistic about the future, and about our ability to master it. Progressives face adversity but they insist that adversity cannot last and that it must eventually give way to good fortune. This is a common re-

frain. Thus Piore insists that Republican economic policy is "a prescription for a continuous decline in the standard of living . . . for a sizable portion of the lower end of the income distribution. In such a situation the social tensions . . . would only be the beginning of a series of upheavals that would eventually lead to revolt and rebellion, if not forestalled by legislative restrictions." It is not Piore's prognosis that I question. If Republican policies are adopted—and there is a good chance that in some version they will be adopted, though perhaps by Democrats—then the standard of living of many Americans *will* decline. But it does not follow from this that the immiseration that might occur would lead to widespread rebellion that could only be forestalled by coercive means. *This* judgment, I would suggest, falls in the realm of prophecy. Suffering may or may not lead to protest, but there is an enormous gulf separating discrete acts of protest from an accumulation of protests sufficient to provoke "legislative restrictions." Yet the rhetorical effect of Piore's formulation is to suggest that current trends can only result in two possibilities, either discontent and repression or progressive social reform. Indeed, what seem like two possibilities are in fact a single one, since both scenarios involve an escalation of class conflict and a pressure for social change that can only be abated by the triumph of a progressive agenda.

**T**he most explicit statement of this theme is provided by Mark Levinson in a *Dissent* essay (Fall 1995) entitled "Looking Backward: The Republican Revolution." Levinson presents an imaginary dialogue between a reporter and a *Dissent* editor sometime in the early twenty-first century. The editor explains to the reporter why the Republican Revolution of the mid-1990s was a passing phenomenon that grew increasingly unpopular as the years passed by, and he recounts how a growing mass movement, centered around a revitalized AFL-CIO, emerged to contest Republican policy and advance a program called Democracy 2000. The program of Levinson's imaginary "Democracy 2000" is the program of current progressives. In Levinson's account: "Candidates signed on to it, and unions and com-

munity organizations ran grassroots campaigns of support. In a way, it was modeled on the Contract With America, but it had more popular support than the Contract." Levinson presents this, of course, as a utopian fantasy, but he does so in all earnestness. The scenario he imagines is the scenario imagined by most current progressives, who reason that the status quo can only produce unhappiness and resistance, and that only a progressive movement can remedy the political crisis bound to follow.

The progressive argument, then, recapitulates a common refrain that can be traced back to Marx and to Hegel before him—that there is a dynamic of change built into the current order of things, that the unresolved difficulties of the present give history a progressive tendency or directionality. Yet, as Michael Walzer suggested in the Winter 1996 *Dissent*: "the various social catastrophes looming in the mind of the left—millions of men and women begging in the streets, the destruction of the black middle-class and the disappearance of black students from elite universities, massive environmental pollution, a surge in industrial accidents, and so on—are probably not going to happen, at least not on the expected scale. A long, dreary, and dispiriting decline in all these areas is more likely than a dramatic crash."

- *The Historical Fallacy.* What these various weaknesses in the new progressivism add up to is a seriously questionable reading of the historical moment.

Consider the Progressive era itself, the touchstone for most of these writers. The Progressives instituted a series of important reforms: they effected a transformation of American liberalism, away from a neo-Jeffersonian distrust of state power toward an active reformism based on a robust federal government. There is much to admire here. And yet if we pause for but a sketchy comparison between the Progressive era and our own, it will be clear how different the next American century must be:

- (1) While Progressivism drew force from an ascendant liberal Protestantism, today the most politically mobilized religious force in America—the Christian Coalition—is on the far right.

- (2) Progressive public discourse was sup-

ported by an active, reformist, muckraking journalism for which there is simply no current analogue, much though people like Dionne try; and the mass media today function to deaden serious ethical conviction rather than to nourish it.

(3) Progressive reforms were supported by a growing faith in the power of science—scientific management, administrative science, educational science—connected to the emergence and ascendancy of the modern research university. Yet neither science nor the university today has this kind of credibility or this kind of reformist ambition; and the social sciences today are thoroughly specialized, anesthetized, and insulated from broader currents of political argument and social reform.

(4) The age of Progressivism was the age of a growing labor movement, while the labor movement today is in serious and possibly terminal decline.

(5) Progressive reforms were functionally compatible with, and in some sense required by, the form of corporate capitalism that was evolving at the turn of the last century. Yet the interests once served by the national-corporate form of regulation have now transcended the boundaries of the nation-state. The form of “flexible accumulation” that is ascendant requires neither a strong collective bargaining agent—a union movement—nor the same kinds of social and economic regulation. It is, in other words, in many ways *destructive* of progressive types of social and economic policy.

(6) Progressivism was made possible by the flourishing of a variety of radical movements in American society to the left of the Progressives, including the International Workers of the World, the remnants of turn of the century Populism, and a Socialist party that, under the leadership of Eugene V. Debs, had a significant electoral and an even more significant cultural presence. The Progressive movement, and the reforms that it instituted, was in large part an effort to *co-opt* these political forces. Yet American politics today is mobilized to the right rather than the left. As a result there does not exist anything remotely resembling the kind of political pressure that gave impetus to earlier efforts at social reform.

This is not to say that social movements are impossible or that specific reform efforts are fu-

tile. It is simply to say that there are no good reasons to believe that it is possible to recreate a current day analogue of earlier progressive movements. Current conditions make the recreation of a coherent, mass-based progressive movement of social reform highly unlikely.

### What Is To Be Done?

Surely something should be done to remedy the serious problems befalling American society and to address the deteriorating legitimacy of its democratic politics. Yet I would suggest that the question of “what is to be done?” is itself an anachronism of an earlier political era. It presumes that there is a unified political subject to whom this question can be posed. But there is no core issue around which a mass progressive constituency might readily be forged. And there is no way that the many problems confronting American society can be remedied through a single democratic agency.

At its heart the progressive vision suffers from a typically modernist faith in the powers of collective action, a faith shared by liberal progressives like Croly and Marxist progressives like Gramsci. As Croly insisted: “In this country the solution of the social problem demands the substitution of conscious social ideal for the earlier instinctive homogeneity of the American nation,” and “a vigorous and conscious assertion of the public as opposed to private and special interests.” *The Promise of American Life* presents a powerful vision of a strong, national government exercising public power for public purposes. It expresses an infectious optimism, and offers a powerful antidote to the conservative Jeffersonianism that held back reform in the late nineteenth century, and that today threatens the reforms of the twentieth. And yet it is impossible to share this optimism. Think about the achievements it has produced—a robust if limited public sector; an extraordinary physical infrastructure of railways, roads, sewers, and public utilities; and an equally impressive cultural infrastructure of schools, museums, and public parks. Think of the cities that owe their phenomenal growth in the twentieth century to this progressivism. They are truly an impressive legacy, even if they did not “solve” the social problem

in America. But they are all in various stages of decomposition, increasingly the sources of our problems rather than the means of their solution. And the spirit of progressive reform has given way to a spirit of cynicism not simply about the power but about the very meaning of collective purpose.

The progressive vision of conscious purpose, in short, seems to have reached its tragic denouement. It is not clear that there is any way beyond this state of affairs, and there is surely no reason for optimism of any sort.

In April of 1995 Robert Reich published an op-ed piece in the *New York Times* entitled "Drowning in the Second Wave." A critique of the Republican Contract With America, the essay calls for a renewed federal commitment to rebuild the "human capital" of American workers so that they can compete in the global marketplace. Only then, Reich insists, will Americans be poised to ride the rising tide of "third wave" technologies and the opportunities they present. Reich is one of the few remaining "progressives" in the Clinton White House, and his argument epitomizes the progressive vision. Yet Reich's aspirations have come to naught. The reason, it seems to me, is simple. What if American society is not drowning in the second wave but *drowning in the third wave*? What if the tidal wave of change that is currently taking place is overwhelming? What, in other words, if there is a profound and irremediable disjuncture between our difficulties and the powers available to us for their remedy?

In an article for *Dissent* written after the 1994 elections (Spring 1995), I wrote that "the weakness of genuinely democratic agencies should lead us indeed to a pessimism of the intellect, but also to a tempering of the will. Only a more modest, localist democracy now makes sense in America." By localist democracy I meant the opposite of a *totalizing* strategy of social reform or transformation, of a new "hegemony," whether this be the hegemony of Lind's "progressive liberal nationalism" or Rogers's "progressive left."

This idea of localist democracy is not parochial. To insist that democratic responses to our problems must be partial is perfectly consistent with a general, "global" understanding of how things fit together; and it is equally consistent

with all kinds of regional, national, and even transnational forms of organization. It simply refuses to imagine that these organizations can or should be all-encompassing or that their projects will eventually converge on a common program of social change. A localist democracy, then, is only localist in the metaphoric sense, not in the geographic one. Further, the reasons for localist democracy are pragmatic rather than dogmatic. It is not out of allegiance to the rhetoric of Jefferson that localist democracy recommends itself, nor is it out of a hostility toward reform; it is because the conditions that once supported "progressive" politics have been altered, and the prospects for a revitalization of progressivism are dim.

Neither is localist democracy complacent. We cannot afford to throw up our hands and do nothing in response to the pressing problems before us. But neither do I think that there is any single strategy that might encompass the range of practical responses to these problems.

**W**hat, then, does this view of localist democracy mean in practice? I can only furnish some examples. They do not converge on an overarching vision of social change. Neither do they constitute an exhaustive sampling of the possible forms "localist democracy" might take. Yet each represents a viable form of democratic response to contemporary challenges.

(1) *The Algebra Project*. Founded in 1982 by Bob Moses, a former leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the project seeks to help poor, at-risk students acquire math literacy and basic learning skills by creating a supportive network of parents, teachers, administrators, and community leaders. The project has been adopted by over one hundred schools across the country. In her recent book *Reclaiming Democracy*, Mehta Mendel-Reyes suggests that the Algebra Project represents an abandonment of Moses's earlier vision of "participatory democracy," and that its narrow focus on math education is inconsistent with broader themes of democratic empowerment. Yet it is also possible to view the project as an eminently pragmatic approach to democratic empowerment, which attacks a specific problem of math illiteracy



through specific pedagogic solutions, involving local communities in a way that seeks to promote a sense of efficacy and to make a difference in childrens' lives. Such activities address practical concerns, they resist the deteriorating conditions besetting the poor, and they promote loose networks of common concern and commitment. They are modest, but they are also potentially effective.

(2) *Community organizations, such as the Association of Communities Organized for Reform (ACORN), the Industrial Areas Foundation, and the Citizen Action Coalition.* Such organizations do not constitute a "backyard revolution" if we mean by this that they represent the seeds of a general and dramatic transformation of American society. But they are vital ways through which citizens can address specific difficulties, such as urban decay, affordable housing, or crime, by harnessing existing, albeit limited, community resources. Groups such as these help to organize local community development through the promotion of political skills, and they furnish national networks of organizers and activists that share information and strategy.

(3) *The movement for environmental justice,* which began as a series of local responses to toxic waste disposal problems and blossomed into a broad-based movement organized around issues of class, gender, and race, has heightened public awareness about environmental concerns, raised the cost of corporate negligence, and created an extensive network of organizing and information-sharing. The environmental justice movement has not transformed American capitalism or effected an overarching vision of progressive reform. But it has profoundly shaped public discourse and provided outlets for civic responsibility.

(4) *The new economic networks* that have recently been organized—largely by unions—in response to the globalization of capital and the new system of "flexible accumulation." Such networks monitor national and transnational investment and the environmental impact of such investment, track wages and the human rights of workers, and provide solidarity and support across state and local boundaries. One example of such a network is the coalition of groups, in

the United States, Mexico, and Canada that recently developed to challenge the North American Free Trade Agreement. Another would be the Workers' Rights Boards that have been formed by Jobs With Justice in Cleveland, Boston, Buffalo, and Vermont, which hear worker complaints and have instituted informal mediation processes involving local civic, religious, business, and labor leaders to resolve such grievances. These networks do not constitute a wholesale alternative to corporate power. As Hilary Wainwright has argued: "They have been formed primarily as networks of resistance. . . [and] they exist only in the nooks and crannies of the capitalist edifice. Where they lack the support of some public institution or independent foundation they have a very precarious existence."<sup>\*</sup> Yet they represent important forms of collective action and democratic empowerment. While they recognize the global economic sources of many pressing problems, and while they abjure parochial solutions, they represent *partial* ways of addressing these problems, ways of resisting adversity without seeking fully to conquer it.

**H**annah Arendt once described democratic forms of praxis as "islands in a sea or as oases in a desert." In a social world inhospitable to democratic awareness, agency, and empowerment, forms of civic engagement that *do* promote awareness, agency, and empowerment are like oases—rare, isolated phenomena, perpetually threatened by the encroachment of the desert, in danger of being drained of life, or simply of being overwhelmed by the heat.

This, I think, is an apt metaphor for the future of democracy in America. The prevailing forces in our society and in our world are damaging to democracy, both in the advantages they distribute to some and in the problems they distribute to most. These problems are accumulating just as the capacity to master them in a coherent way is diminishing. Democrats facing the twenty-first century confront, to use the language of Walter Lippmann, a world of drift that they

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<sup>\*</sup> Hilary Wainwright, *Arguments for a New Left: Answering the Free Market Right* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1994), p. 153.

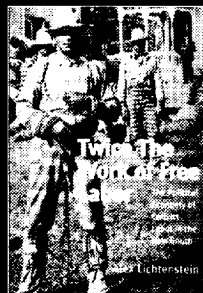
cannot master. There is difficulty, and there is disorientation aplenty, but there is also a dearth of constructive political energy and a surplus of ill-will and resentment.

This is not a cause for despair, for there are democratic energies, and there are vehicles for them. But these energies, and their vehicles, offer little hope for large-scale, progressive social reform. The progressive vision of social intelligence and social policy is simply too ambitious. Local elections can be won by "progressives." And local initiatives can have an accumulating impact on public awareness and public policy. But the project of marshalling a new hegemony is anachronistic, and is not likely to succeed in constructing a new regime of public policy or in mastering the problems confronting us. What I have called initiatives in "localist democracy" are surely insufficient to this task. They cannot help us to master our difficulties, and citizens who engage them are bound to be frustrated. But it may well be that we ought to give up the hope of mastering our difficulties, and settle simply for resisting them as best we can.

In Albert Camus's novel *The Plague*, Dr. Rieux, the heroic leader of the resistance, is asked what gives him the confidence to persist in his action. "I've no more," he responds, "than the pride that's needed to keep me going. I have no idea what's awaiting me, or what will happen when this all ends. For the moment I know this: there are sick people and they need curing." The world, he avers, is shaped by death; and our victories on behalf of life are always temporary, always fragile. Yet this "is no reason," he maintains, "for giving up the struggle."

American democracy faces severe challenges. I do not think that we can in good faith confront the next century with the same optimism, and ambition, with which Progressives confronted the one that is now ending. The kinds of democratic responses that are likely to be effective are bound to be partial, limiting, fractious, and in many ways unsatisfying. They are likely to disappoint our modernist quest for mastery and our progressive faith in the future. Yet it is the great virtue of democracy as a form of politics that it prizes contingency, for politics is nothing else but the Sisyphean task of constructing provisional solutions to our unmasterable difficulties. □

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# RESPONSES

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**E.J. Dionne Jr.**

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**I**n his fine book on Hannah Arendt and Albert Camus, Jeffrey Isaac makes an entirely convincing case that one can respect the tragic aspect of political action without losing hope in its possibilities. Perhaps it's because Jeff Isaac has so influenced my view that I now find myself considerably less pessimistic than he is about our current situation.

He is broadly right in a number of his criticisms of the progressive (or is it neoprogressive?) outlook. But I think he misses the extent to which progressives, liberals, and social democrats may already have begun to move away from some of the errors he ascribes to them.

For example, he argues that "the new progressive literature consistently fails to attend to the cultural and symbolic sources of politics." It's true that some on the left try to reduce everything to economics and pretend that other questions—race, culture, crime, welfare—are "distractions." But that is no longer the rule. If anything, the tendency among progressives (especially those running for public office) is to highlight the connections between economic questions and social and moral questions—connections I tried to make in my book *They Only Look Dead*—while also accepting that, for most citizens, the moral and cultural spheres have both autonomy and integrity. It's quite clear, for example, that parents worry about the messages the culture is sending their children and about their children's safety in school and on the streets. But they also worry *at the same time* about whether they will earn enough to support their families. The left is foolish if it ignores the first set of worries, but the right often ignores the second. Progressives have finally started to notice that there are links between the two.

Similarly, Isaac is right in saying that it's not enough for neoprogressives to declare that the wars over race, gender, and sexuality are

over and to assume that the country will miraculously "get back on track" with class politics. Isaac goes on to cite Todd Gitlin's fine book *The Twilight of Common Dreams* and notes Gitlin's noble call to build bridges instead of digging cultural trenches. Isaac says, "It's hard to build solid bridges on shifting soil." Of course that's true. But Gitlin's book is itself a sign that neoprogressives are not pretending that the culture wars have suddenly ended, but instead are working actively to find a settlement that roots pluralism in universal values. It's hard work, but people such as Gitlin are trying to get it done.

Isaac speaks of the ways in which "mass communications . . . dull political sensibilities, and help to create mass social *irrealism*." (His emphasis.) Well, sure, sometimes. But it's simply not true that Americans have been anesthetized by this "mass social *irrealism*." On the contrary, it's quite clear that there is widespread worry about declining living standards, and that this worry had a political effect even in this year's *Republican* primaries. And reform is in the air even within the mass media. The debate stirred by the "civic journalism" movement and the substantial response to James Fallows's recent book on journalism are signs of at least a modest effort to reassert the civic and democratic responsibilities of those engaged in "mass communications."

Isaac is right in pointing to the problems raised for progressive politics by the decline of the progressive churches and the problems of the trade union movement. (I might point to the signs of revival in both spheres, but won't risk looking Panglossian by pushing the point too hard.) And nobody can argue with Isaac's criticism of the idea that history is inexorably on the side of a progressive transformation. I do believe that the pressures created by global economic competition and a popular desire for a greater sense of social fairness and personal opportunity point more toward progressive politics rather than to-

ward a rendezvous with radical *laissez-faire*. But that is a view rooted in a particular analysis, not in a historicist faith. Those who claim to be on the side of history are usually disappointed.

But if anyone should be disappointed by history at this juncture, it is those conservatives who thought only eighteen months ago that they had arrived at the Finland Station destined to lead a successful revolution to demolish the "liberal welfare state" and push the center-left into oblivion. (Right-wing Leninism turns out to be as flawed as its left-wing variant.) At the very least, it can now be said that the progressive idea and the basic underpinnings of the social insurance state enjoy much deeper support than either optimistic conservatives or dispirited liberals and social democrats once believed.

And are not the "localist" initiatives Isaac describes signs that our time may not be as "inhospitable to democratic awareness, agency and empowerment" as Isaac asserts? Why should such initiatives be purely local phenomena? Why is it not reasonable to ask national political in-

stitutions and the broader culture to lend them support? In fact, many of the "local" efforts Isaac describes grew out of national movements. So it was with the original Progressive movement, which grew nationally and locally at the same time.

Isaac is right to warn progressives of the dangers involved in seeing everything in economic terms, in pretending that their victory is ineluctable, in highlighting national action to the exclusion of local and decentralized initiative. He is right to see the decline of popular confidence in "experts" as making this time very different from the original Progressive Era. He is especially right in warning against the hubris of assuming that politics can offer any person or any movement total mastery. But reformist politics is not about mastery. The reformer's faith is more modest. It is a belief that democratic political action can lead to gradual social improvement through steady work. I see no reason to give up on that.

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### Mark Levinson

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**W**hen I read Jeff Isaac I fell into depression. Twenty years of my life—and thousands of others'—wasted! In the depth of my despair, however, I had a revelation. Isaac was right. "A new 'activist public policy,' centered around the problems of a post-industrial economy and the decline of middle-class living standards . . . is anachronistic . . . Democrats who wish to address the serious problems confronting American liberal democracy" need to think, and act, "in a different way."

This was no time to be depressed. There were so many people who didn't recognize the "fallacies" on which their beliefs were based. Surely if they knew of Isaac's argument, they would not waste their time trying to build a progressive movement. They would work on local projects. It became my mission to spread Isaac's word.

I went to a local union meeting. A group of workers were discussing how to organize a coalition to support a program of low interest rates,

stronger economic growth, public investment, a jobs program, labor-law reform, an increase in the minimum wage. The workers thought this would begin to reverse twenty years of declining wages and increasing inequality.

These people had not read Isaac, so they did not know about the *materialist fallacy*. These workers actually believed that one of the most significant political facts of the moment is that three-quarters of the workforce has experienced declining wages for twenty years. They naively thought that it would make political sense for the Democratic party to appeal to the economic interest of the majority of Americans.

I patiently told them that while declining wages are important, what is "*truly real*" in American life is "acrimonious identity politics, racial antagonism, middle-class white resentment of affirmative action and welfare, religious fundamentalism, and the phenomenal mobilization of the Christian Coalition."

One of them said, "Of course that's real. But

let me tell you what else is real. I can't sleep at night because if I lose my job—and a lot of my friends have—I'm in the street. I have no savings and a pile of debt. I'm scared. I thought Clinton had the right idea in 1992 when he got elected on a platform of putting people first. But once in office he implemented the economic policy of George Bush. All he talks about is reducing the deficit, NAFTA, and how well the bond and stock markets responded to his program. Well, whoop-de-do. Whatever happened to putting people first? When hundreds of my co-workers were laid off, they blamed Clinton. Many got new jobs, but they pay less, and they have no health insurance or pensions. Most of these people voted Republican in 1994—believe me it's not because they like Newt Gingrich—and for Pat Buchanan in 1996. There is a lot of insecurity and anger in this country. If there's no political program to unite people, this anger and insecurity will take ugly forms."

Blinded by their own material conditions these workers couldn't see the materialist fallacy. I tried another tack.

"I'm very sympathetic to what you're saying, but according to Jeff Isaac your politics are based on the *voluntarist fallacy*. You don't 'acknowledge the irreversibility of history.' The civil rights revolution, changes in gender and sexual attitudes, coupled with the decline of the labor movement, new forms of racism, and so on have created permanent schisms. You 'give no account of how these divisions can be transcended.' "

Another worker laughed. "That is simply wrong. Everyone knows that race and cultural issues have pushed key constituencies away from the Democrats. The question is: why haven't liberals pursued economic policies that would keep them together? It's not as if this is a new issue. Jeff Faux recently pointed out that during World War II there were white race riots in cities that voted overwhelmingly Democratic. In 1948 Harry Truman desegregated the armed forces—a much bigger step at the time than permitting gays to remain in the military in 1993. Yet the white working class voted Democratic because Roosevelt and Truman were seen as being on the workers' side in the struggle over economic security."

I wasn't getting very far with these workers. So I tried to explain what Isaac meant by the *rationalist fallacy*.

"Look," I said, "the problem with your program is that it 'vastly overstates the possibilities for the general public enlightenment.' "

"What?"

"There's this guy named Jean Baudrillard, and he says that we live in a hyperreal society. It means, according to Isaac, 'that the modes of communication and experience increasingly prevalent in American society efface this reality, by juxtaposing it with other "realities," and by creating new "realities" that necessarily detract from it, and perhaps deny it.' "

"I don't know what the hell you're talking about."

"I'll try and put it in plain English. You and your co-workers watch television and you are undoubtedly influenced by commercials. As a result you probably suffer from what Isaac calls the 'attention deficit disorder of American mass culture.' "

"Listen, buddy" (they were starting to get angry), "I'm still not sure I understand what you're saying, but to the extent that I do, I don't like it. You either have faith in the capacities of people or you don't. If you don't, you deny the moral basis of our democracy. I suppose guys like Isaac can see through the hyperreality, while morons like us can't."

I didn't know how to respond. I thought he had a good point, so I tried to change the subject.

"I want you to understand we are really on the same side. It's just that Jeff Isaac has convinced me you're wasting your time trying to create a progressive movement at the national level. Your politics are based on *historical and historicist fallacies*. You don't understand how different the current period is from the Progressive Era, and you believe 'that there is a dynamic of change built into the current order of things, that the unresolved difficulties of the present give history a progressive tendency or directionality.' "

"I think we understand all too well how different this period is from the past and I certainly don't think that there is anything inevitable about the direction of change. The difference between us is that you and Professor

Isaac appear to think that history ended with the 1994 elections. You think we can't change things in this country and I think we can."

It was clear that these workers didn't understand. I decided to explain Isaac's argument to members of a community organization that had an office in the same building as the union. This group organized citizens around local issues such as getting roads paved and fighting to get the neighborhood its just share of government money for housing and job training. I explained to them that "the progressive vision of conscious purpose" has "reached its tragic denouement," and that "only a more modest, localist democracy

now makes sense in America."

To my surprise they reacted like . . . the trade unionists! One of them said, "We are community organizers because that is what we do best. But unless we build a movement to confront the inequities in our economic arrangements and the undemocratic nature of corporate power, our work is doomed to be ineffectual. What we do should not be counterposed to that of the union activists. Our activities complement each other."

Isaac's arguments weren't persuasive. I was beginning to question my revelation. Perhaps Isaac was wrong.

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### Jane Mansbridge

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**I** agree with many parts of Jeff Isaac's argument, and particularly with his list of ways in which our current era differs from that of the Progressives. I agree too with the general thrust of his presumptions—that we must invest ourselves in local initiatives that work. Compared to the most progressive countries in the world, the United States has often made its best, most innovative, longest lasting contributions through decentralization. Local initiative is one of our most useful cultural specializations: let's exploit it.

But look, folks, it's an election year. Now is the time to come to the aid of the DEMOCRATIC PARTY.

Yes, the old Democratic party. And the PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN! No matter what your level of cynicism about party politics, no matter what your disagreements with the president's attempts to out-Republican the Republicans, you have to recognize that in 1996 the thing that will make the greatest difference to working people all over the United States is to elect a Democratic rather than a Republican president. The thing that will make the next greatest difference is to bring in a Democratic Congress. Every vote in Congress will count, on a lot of different bills.

We don't have the discipline among our activists in the United States that we see in Europe. A lot of activists there—in Sweden, Ger-

many, even Italy—know that at times (I'm talking *episodic* here; this isn't the CP), what's best for the whole collective is swallowing your disagreements—and I mean major, heavy-duty disagreements—and working together to get one important thing done.

This election is that one important thing.

So, if the question is, "What Is to Be Done?" the answer is: work your butt off in the election.

Those who don't agree, read on. Those who agree, or are reading this after the election, skip to "Why national or local?"

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### Do You Still Need To Be Convinced?

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After the civil rights revolution and the backlash of the Reagan revolution, which together politicized the Circuit Court level of the federal judiciary, it has become crucial who appoints the judges of this country. Like it or not, we are living in a world in which large numbers of issues are settled in the courts. Another term of appointments subject to veto by the radical right would close the judicial route to progressive change for a generation.

I can think of dozens of issues on which I opposed the policy President Clinton pushed through. On several I was bitterly, deeply opposed. But he did also get through changes like these: a raise in the earned income tax credit, which helps every single one of the working poor

every day; more progressive income tax rates; “motor-voter” registration; the Family and Medical Leave Act, which guarantees employment on return from a medical- or family-related absence; the Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances Act; the Brady Bill for handguns and an assault weapons ban; increased funding for school districts with many poor children, for Head Start, for WIC, for battered women’s shelters, for the homeless, for housing, and for legal services; increased AIDS public health services; repeal of the abortion counseling “gag rule”; repeal of the ban on importing RU-486; and more aggressive enforcement of the NLRA unfair labor practices prohibitions, OSHA violations of workplace safety, the Environmental Protection Act, and equal opportunity complaints.\*

Do you think any one of those policies would have been put through by a Republican president or a Republican Congress?

Clinton has been deeply, deeply handicapped by never having—even in the first half of his term—a strong Democratic majority in Congress. In the more recent half of his term he had a *Republican* Congress. This is not, as we know, what Kennedy or Johnson (or FDR, or even Carter) had to work with. Given that, he still made choices you and I thought were wrong. That is not what we need to focus on now. We can’t engage in mild pessimism, major pessimism—or any contemplation of our own moods—now. We just need to work for a Democratic victory, both in Congress and the presidency.

There is a time for everything. This month is a time for giving money to the Democratic party, offering to help at party headquarters, working with any grassroots group you’re involved in to get out the vote—and trying to bring some sense into the head of any friend who thinks that this election won’t make a difference.

### Why National or Local?

The election over, the very experimental logic that inspires Jeff Isaac—to turn to the (metaphori-

cally) local level, the programs that work, the incremental strategy—ought to apply as well to the (metaphorically) national level. Why not try out new ideas and visions even when they are unifying or national in scope?

None of us can know what moment we’re in. Let John Judis and Michael Lind, E.J. Dionne and Joel Rogers cast their visions before us and everyone else. They’re wrong, undoubtedly, about some specifics of the Progressive analogy. And they are also undoubtedly wrong when (which is not always) they look only nationally, or to a mass-based movement, for an answer. But, as Isaac says, the policies they propose are typically good. Some of their ideas might work. And if, improbable as it is, some vision and some set of spokespeople came together with some set of historical accidents to produce a movement that looked like a “unified ‘left,’” many of us would carp and protest, but we would be buoyed by that moment in history and swept forward again as unpredictably as we were in the sixties. Why not cast many visions upon the waters, and see which ones float?

In the long run I am more than mildly pessimistic. In particular, I note Isaac’s point that many Progressive-era reforms were instituted only because they helped corporate capitalism. Maybe on some matters progressives can’t get anywhere without the support of important sectors of capital. This is Peter Swenson’s argument, based on the experience of the U.S. New Deal and the Swedish social democratic welfare state (including its core legislation and its original solidaristic wage policy, all supported by the export-oriented sectors of Swedish capital).“ If progressive reform needs capitalist support, then progressives need to think hard about what policies can attract support from what kinds of capitalists, and what institutional mechanisms might help these capitalists discover that those reforms are in their interest.

Although I don’t like it, the nation has become, in the years since the Progressives, even more dependent on national-level decisions. Globalization has been accompanied by the

\*For these and more, see Richard Rothstein’s “Friends of Bill?” *American Prospect* No. 20 (Winter 1995), pp. 32-41.

\*\*Peter Swenson, “Bringing Capital Back In,” *World Politics* 43 (1991), pp. 513-44, and “Arranged Alliance,” *Politics and Society* (forthcoming early 1997).

growth of international organizations, whose negotiations require representation from nations as nations. The post-Progressive era Great Depression let everyone know that the economy, stupid, needs national direction. (And Clinton's electorate responded to that knowledge in 1992.) The nation's courts make decisions, like *Roe v. Wade*, that change the context of personal life at one swoop. How many immigrants we admit has to be a national-level decision. Progressives can't ignore the hard decisions at the national level or the need for as much unity as we can muster at that level.

Isaac is right in saying we can't go back to the Progressives' moment. He is wrong in say-

ing the only way to respond is partial, giving up the search for a unifying and purposive, symbolically accessible, common vision.

So let us keep reading Dick Flacks and Ronnie Dugger, Judis, Lind, Dionne, and Rogers, and keep supporting the New Party as well as the Coalition for New Priorities. Out of the mix may come the partial, limiting, fractious, and unsatisfying, but practical, brew that is right for 2000 and beyond. And because fortune is fickle, out of it might even come the fragments we can weave into a vision that will appeal far beyond the readership of *Dissent*, but that will still unify some of us, sometimes.

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### Joel Rogers

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**J**eff Isaac believes contemporary progressives face serious new problems of program and agency: identifying "what is to be done" to advance egalitarian democratic values under present economic and social conditions, and finding someone to do it. Sharing these values with Isaac, I agree with him that we need a new strategy to realize them. We disagree on what that strategy should be.

To begin with our common problem. We need to figure out policies and organizational forms appropriate to a changed world: where the nation state is less capable of directing the economy within its borders; where solving supply-side and regulatory problems is essential to citizen well-being; where traditional productivist politics is qualified by concern about such "non-economic" issues as the environment or gender; where "the working class" and "the family" and "black people" and other building blocks of progressive agency are not unambiguous, homogeneous, or stable terms. As nobody knows just what those new policies and organizational forms are, moreover, finding them will require social experiment and learning—so we also need to build the organizational routines and supports for that. Steady work indeed.

As to how to do that work, Isaac believes "new progressives" don't have much to say—or that what they have to say is too ambitious or

totalizing. He thinks that I and others suffer many fallacies of belief: that the only thing people care about is cash; that social differences don't create problems of political will; that speaking truth to power will make power roll over; that things are sure to get better since they have to; that all late nineties, whether eighteen or nineteen, are basically the same. I don't believe any of these things, so I guess I'm on the wrong list. Or maybe the list is wrong. But leaving Isaac's characterization of others aside, what's he got to offer?

"Localist democracy." Not understood geographically, mind you, much less as Jeffersonian ideology, but as a "chastening" of democratic ambition. Isaac recommends no new organizational strategy or program, but attitude adjustment: a forsaking of big-think and especially big-organization think; a recognition that we will never all agree on everything we think it important to have agreement on, and therefore never on any ambitious common project.

I find this either uselessly abstract or simply wrong—in any case not promising as political strategy.

On social organization, Isaac abjures both localism in economic governance and broad agreement on public accountability and program. But at a time when additional local capacity is needed to solve problems beyond the reach of



the nation state, and when the dangers of economic inequality and political particularism and inequality are growing, this seems exactly the wrong approach. Take economic development. Any progressive strategy should aim to close off the low road of “downsizing” and “restructuring” and help pave the high road, a two-step strategy that requires holding economic practice to higher standards than at present and building the range of public goods—training, modernization, new regulatory regimes, more competent worker organization—needed to enable firms to meet them under competitive conditions. Doing this requires developing institutions both highly attuned to local economic practice and its variation and able—consider the “tradeoffs” commonly alleged between environmentally sustainable development and job growth—to overcome traditional issue divisions through practices reconciling their respective concerns.

A natural place to begin such a strategy is in our neglected metropolitan regions, which already hold within them the key ingredients of a high-wage, low-waste, more democratically-ordered economy. But without some framework of national standards and coordination, one region’s economic success is another’s loss. So the organizational beginnings of an alternative here would aim both to build relevant local capacity (the “localism” in which Isaac places so little hope) and guard against issue and interest factionalism within and across those locales (the “common program” he rejects as well).

On program, if Isaac thinks of “chastening” as something like reformism or muddling through—well, that’s an old mixed bag that he doesn’t help sort. Some problems are tractable to stand-alone or partial solutions, others require coordination across diverse issue areas or more radical effort. We could use some distinctions here. We could also use some new technique—for example, to support governance strategies more nuanced and diverse than the “live free or die” choice between markets and public hierarchies on which public debate remains transfixed. And we can always use some new ideas—on finding the money to support needed public goods, or restructuring the welfare state to enhance popular support, or modernizing our in-

dustrial base, or making government accountable. Such institutional and policy innovation is higher on my list than attitude adjustment.

Finally, on the feasibility and attraction of large progressive projects, I flatly disagree. Of course we’re doomed if we make agreement on everything a condition of moving together on anything, or if we require that everyone agree on something before we try to do it. But on these terms, democratic forces also would have been doomed in the 1960s, 1930s, 1890s, and 1860s, not to mention 1776. Of course we’re divided at present. But that division is not just cause, but consequence, of the absence of an articulate mass program. Any successful political project creates conditions of its own advance—often by creating a new social subject through declaration of that presumptive subject’s aims. You don’t just find an agent of new politics: a working class, a civil rights constituency, a cosmopolitan public. You make it, in part by declaring that politics.

As to the proposition—offered in the face of titanic corporate mobilization, the Christian Right, and all the rest—that the chief problem of American progressives is that they strive too insistently for unity and scale . . . well, words fail me.

The fact is, large and overlapping portions of our currently disorganized public regularly declare themselves willing to support a new progressive program—yes, a program recognizing this world’s difference from the 1930s—if currently divided progressives united to offer them one. The fact is, that to be seen and supported by the public in this media-distracted and organizationally divided culture, that offer needs to be made at some enduring scale. Fact is, relevant scale and accessibility require organization, pooling of resources, some breaking with present routines—preeminently in progressive strategies, or the lack thereof, regarding electoral politics. Fact is, the groups and individuals who agree on all this separately have among them the resources needed to make that happen; the task is to get them to act together, to join those resources, to become more rather than less than the sum of their divided parts. Not suffering from the “moral fallacy” that because this should be done it will be done, I think we’d be crazy not to try.

Sean Wilentz

**W**hen Jeffrey Isaac calls for chastened political expectations, I can't help but agree. Given the political blockages and intellectual disarray of the moment, who wouldn't? As I write this, in early July, the *New York Times* reports that federal cutbacks may necessitate the partial privatization of the National Park Service—one of the most successful and least controversial legacies of the original Progressives. If the parks cannot be sustained in the name of the common good, what can? At moments like these, the old spirit of Progressivism seems as dead as a door-nail. But then again, I have my better moments, too—when I think about Newt Gingrich's astonishing fall from public grace or about the growing divisions within what once looked like an impregnable Republican coalition.

Of course, the political situation now is worse, in some respects, than it was in, say, 1910, when radicalism and reform crackled across the headlines. But in other respects things are at least as hopeful now as they were then—something Isaac suggests when he talks in passing of more recent liberal triumphs. Think of the United States at the time of the original Progressives—when formal segregation was the rule in much of the country; the Ku Klux Klan was on the rise; women did not have the vote; academia and the so-called liberal professions were bulwarks of smug gentility; right-wing fundamentalism was

gathering strength; the rise of communism and fascism was just around the corner; and the labor movement, although full of spirit, was about to suffer a series of disastrous and bloody defeats that would leave it looking moribund by the 1920s.

As for the present: hasn't the Christian Coalition, for all of its power, caused great difficulty inside the Republican party? Is the muck-raking impulse gone (or is it limited now *strictly* to sex scandals)? If the mass media serve the interests of the powers-that-be so faithfully, why do conservatives loathe the media so? With writers like many of those whom Isaac cites—not to mention Theda Skocpol, Paul Starr, William Julius Wilson, and others—have the social sciences really become totally anesthetized, as Isaac claims?

Isaac misreads the neoprogressives when he has them blaming the current situation on the right's ability to distract the attention of the electorate with "phony" social issues. Some writers for whom economics is everything may prefer to see things that way. But E.J. Dionne, Michael Lind, and others have said just the opposite—that it has been liberals' failure to comprehend just how potent and "real" those issues are that has proven so costly. Rather, I take the neoprogressive argument, in its various forms, to be that liberals and leftists have grown so invested in their own form of moralistic thinking about separate group rights that they have lost the ability to articulate much sense of the common good. Partly, this is a legacy of the late 1960s, when liberals (and even some leftists), having wrongly persuaded themselves that economic growth or unionization had stifled the problems of class, turned to race- and gender-based formulas for social justice, and wound up alienating millions of their erstwhile supporters. With some fairness, the left came to be seen as a preserve for elitists, with little to offer ordinary taxpayers—as much a part of the national shell game as their opponents. "Screw 'em all," became the widespread and worrisome, but understandable, popular response.

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I agree with Isaac that “current conditions make the recreation of a coherent, mass-based progressive movement of social reform highly unlikely.” But such a movement hasn’t existed in this country since the demise of the Debsian Socialist party—and yet the left, loosely conceived, has done a great deal to help improve the nation since then. It has done so precisely by organizing in various “localist” ways—on everything from labor’s rights to civil rights—and by applying national political pressure mainly through the Democratic party. In Isaac’s essay, the Democrats turn up as little more than carbon copies of the Republicans. If that were actually so, I would be as discouraged as he is about national politics. But I am not.

I am aware of the many arguments, some of them unanswerable, about the hopelessness of the Democrats, their ties to big money, their traitorous ways. Yet for better *and* worse, the

party is still a prominent vehicle for social and political reform, well worth fighting in and fighting over. Which is exactly what I think most of the writers whom Isaac criticizes are attempting to do, at least implicitly—to redirect the thinking of the Democratic party, much as numerous conservative writers began redirecting the thinking of the Republican party in the 1950s.

None of which precludes Isaac’s “localist” activism, much of which (as in groups like the Alinskyite Industrial Areas Foundation) has been around for a long time. But to see American politics in the either/or fashion that Isaac does is self-defeating. Without the sort of modest movements that Isaac favors, national political reform would be doomed. Equally, though, without some involvement and leverage at the national level—in the grand and imaginative terms that Isaac eschews—“localist” efforts will also be doomed. □

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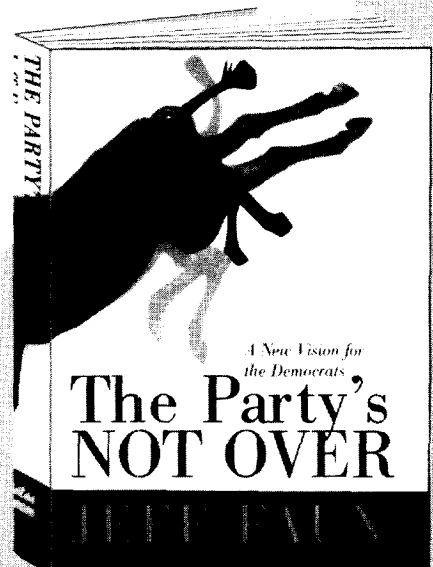
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